

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Bar code reader for PCs a maybe

Bar code readers have substantially increased productivity at supermarket checkout counters. Now, a similar device is available for ordinary personal computers.

It looks like a fat pencil with a tiny light at the end, and is attached by a cable to a small box that plugs into your computer. By moving the wand over the bar codes, the numbers the codes represent appear on the computer screen, just as if they were typed on the keyboard.

This \$495 bar code reader is called the Microscanner and is produced by American Microsystems of Richardson, Texas. It can be used with many IBM PC or PC-compatible computers to read numbers or other data printed in one of the standard bar code formats.

However, there are still a number of stumbling blocks with the

current technology that probably will limit its effective use in business offices:

- ✓ It doesn't always work. The unit I tested did not consistently accept the bar codes, often requiring repeated passes before the codes were converted to characters on the computer screen. This lack of reliability was annoying.

- ✓ Unlike optical scanning devices (OCRs) that read many different ordinary type faces, all alphanumeric characters, and long blocks of type with ease, bar code readers are most effective for only short blocks of numeric bar

codes. Usually the computer is programmed to translate the codes into something else the code stands for. For example, if a series of codes stood for a complicated name, the complicated name would be printed by your program,

not the intermediate code. This saves work and is a benefit. On the other hand, it makes verification as you go along more difficult, which is a negative.

- ✓ In addition to being able to "read" bar codes, you'll probably also need a bar code printer to "write" them as well — to actually generate bar code labels. Thus, if you were using the system for taking inventory, each item in your stock would need a bar code label affixed, or it would have to be printed on the packaging. Unless preprinted labels were constantly purchased for the purpose, you'd need a printer to do it for you. Some dot matrix printers can be programmed to produce bar code labels, but I worry about poor quality and accuracy.

- ✓ Finally, because bar codes are rather large, they are best used for short product numbers, thus reducing the amount of hand movement of the operator. I'm not aware of the widespread use of bar code for applications other than in-

ventory control, probably for this reason.

But despite these limitations, if your business could benefit from a bar code system for product inventory or another similar application, and if the device could be shown to work consistently and accurately in your office, the Microscanner attached to a personal computer may be a real time-saver.

Just one word of caution: the single component, by itself, is not the whole story — even though it's a crucial part. It needs to interface with your particular software. To be safe, I'd suggest purchasing it on a trial basis from a reputable dealer and testing it thoroughly on your own system before finalizing the purchase. Otherwise, it'll make a very expensive paperweight!

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